ONE NATION UNDER GOD

July 3, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Jeremiah 7:1-7
Acts 4:13-21

"We must obey God rather than men."
--Acts 5:29 (RSV)

Have you noticed recently how well God has been doing in places where God is not supposed to exist? It is the one thousand year anniversary of Christianity in the Soviet Union. Because there is clearly a new openness in Mr. Gorbachev's Russia, there has been a lot of press attention in recent weeks to the state of religion there and in other Marxist nations; Americans generally have been surprised.

For hundreds of years before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church was an appendage of the Czarist State. The government sponsored the church, supported it with taxes, regulated the appointment of its clergy, and generally gave oversight and exercised control. That did not change in 1917. It is a surprise to many Western Christians to learn that there is a State Department of Religious Affairs which still oversees the life of the Russian Orthodox Church. What did happen in 1917 was that the new Marxist state declared, quoting Karl Marx, that God did not exist and that in the new rational materialist order, the mythology of God would quickly die. Organized religion would be seen for the "opiate of the people" which it was, and quietly wither away.

That didn't happen. Marx was wrong. The only thing that quietly withered away was the official position that religion would disappear of its own volition. Lenin decided to press the issue of the withering away of religion by beginning 70 years of official opposition and persecution - all the while keeping the Department of Religious Affairs open. Stalin eagerly increased the persecution, executing thousands of clergy and closing churches. He slowed down his program only because he needed the churches' support during World War II. After the war Khrushchev renewed the battle: the number of churches open was reduced, it is estimated, from 70,000 to 7,000. The official position has been to contain religion, restrict church education, publishing, seminary teaching, keep state records of all baptisms and to make church going a public and political liability. The state preserves architecturally significant churches, uses some for libraries, town halls, museums. When Mrs. Reagan and Mrs. Gorbachev inspected some religious art recently, Mrs. Gorbachev was quick to disclaim any religious significance to the work.

The Soviet opposition to religion is a project that has failed. A few weeks ago, in a feature with the intriguing title "The Place of God - Fearing People in a Godless State," the New York Times editorialized: "70 years after Lenin launched the first practical test of Marx's theories, the curious fact is that Communism seems to have done far more for the survival, even the thriving of religion, than all the liberalism and toleration of the West."

The fact is that religion is vigorous in Russia. "The Faith is Flowering in Marx's Garden," the Times announced. Christianity is vigorous in Poland, obviously. In China, after the Cultural Revolution, the world is seeing evidences of a strong, new indigenous Church thriving, growing. A new government scheme in Rumania to destroy thousands of rural villages and reorganize rural life - will run into adamant opposition from churches. In Marxist Mozambique the experiment with atheism has crumbled. When the churches reopened recently, after more than a decade of being closed, the congregations had grown - outgrown their old buildings. (I wonder if someone will market that in America as a church growth scheme?) Christianity has captured the imagination and hope of a younger generation in the Third World in spite of government opposition.

What in the world is going on? God seems to be holding more than his own in officially Godless nations. In fact, there seems to be a kind of direct connection between the strength of religion and official opposition to it.

In the meantime, you and I live in a nation where freedom of religion is honored and protected - if not always understood; a nation which sees itself, rather intentionally, in relationship with God.

Do you remember the day when school began with a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance... "and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." I was in school in 1954 when congress inserted the words "under God." Dwight Eisenhower was President, a Presbyterian, in fact.

"One Nation - Under God." Are we serious? Do we mean that? What God? What does it mean when a nation acknowledges a sovereignty bigger than its own, an authority to which it is accountable? The first thing it means is the acknowledgement that it is not unique; that governments have always appropriated religion to support the goals of government. Someone gave me a copy of the minutes of the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church during the Civil War. Fascinating. Believe me, there is no doubt in those minutes whose side God is on... or where Christian values line up...

The question is complicated actually. Our two lessons this morning are eloquent illustrations.

The first occurs around 600 B.C. in Jerusalem. A man by the name of Jeremiah walks up to the gates of the Temple and says: "Hear the word of the Lord... amend your ways, don't oppress the alien, the orphans and widows, don't shed innocent blood, don't chase after other gods... and I'll let you remain in this place." Jeremiah doesn't have any authority to

say these things. He simply shows up at the Temple one day and presumes to speak in God's name to a state which claims to be "under God." It is not a popular thing to do, - ever.

A little later, the nation has not mended its ways and Jeremiah smashes a pottery jar in a public display of anger and says, in effect, "God will do that to this city." Now things start to get hot. The official court chaplain, Pashur, has Jeremiah arrested, beaten and put in the stocks for the night. In the morning Pashur walks to the stockade, ready to be magnanimous, expecting to find Jeremiah in a penitent mood. But as soon as Jeremiah sees Pashur he unleashes a hot and angry personal attack. "Because you have sold out to the political establishment, Pashur, the Lord doesn't even know your name," Jeremiah says. Not surprisingly, Jeremiah ends up in prison. At his trial his accusation is simple: "This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against the city." [Jeremiah 26:11] That's what "Under God" meant to Jeremiah.

The second vignette happens at the same place, 633 years later. Jesus of Nazareth has been executed. His followers claim he has risen from the dead. Their numbers are increasing rapidly. Two of them, Peter and John, are under arrest for disturbing the peace and making a general nuisance of themselves. At their hearing they are specifically ordered to stop teaching in the name of Jesus, flogged and released. The next day, they're back at it again... this time in direct violation of the law. This time they are charged specifically with civil disobedience. And it is at this moment that Peter comes up with one of the most profoundly revolutionary statements in all of history: "We must obey God rather than men." After another beating the two are released again and they live out their lives in an uneasy tension with the civil authorities, generally breaking the law or engaging in consistent civil disobedience. Finally Peter, too, is executed, crucified in Rome, upside down, tradition has it.

When he had an opportunity to seize political power, or at least to start a political revolution, Jesus declined. When he had an opportunity one day to declare himself on this troublesome matter of loyalty to God and loyalty to the state by deciding for one or the other, he came up with a little of both. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," he said. They didn't arrest him on the spot that day because his opponents really didn't understand what he was saying. Be loyal to the state he said - but God is Lord, even of the state. Your loyalty to God comes first and foremost.

Instead of that tension, people have always tried to separate the two... to have it both ways. The most common rationalization for war-time atrocities - or for secret, peace-time operating outside the law - is "I was obeying orders." One of the things that makes a Presbyterian, is that on this issue, we try very hard to keep loyalty to state and loyalty to God - in conversation with one another, in creative dialogue - sometimes creative conflict with one another. And when there is conflict when someone believes that obedience to God is being violated by obedience to state, Presbyterians have held out for the right of that individual to act on his or her conscience, however unpopular that might be.

Our founder and theological father is John Calvin who saw, more clearly than anyone in history, that belief in a sovereign God has a bearing on the way life is lived politically: and even though he had trouble living with it himself, that belief in a sovereign God meant granting toleration and religious freedom to all people. Along the way Calvin argued with, opposed and insulted a variety of politicians from the King to the city council of Geneva, Switzerland - which finally threw him out of his pulpit and out of town. It is a kind of Presbyterian tradition to live in creative tension with the state.

"God alone is Lord of the conscience" is the way Presbyterians have said that for several centuries. Like our mentor Calvin, even while we have had trouble living with it, we have known that to believe in a sovereign God, is to respect the conscience of the individual. The two are inseparable. To be "Under God," therefore, is not to force that belief on anybody. And so, in the name of our belief and our oldest theological traditions, you will find Presbyterians opposing government sponsored religion.

Does that mean we don't care what people believe? Not at all. It means that part of what we think is important to believe, is that the individual conscience is sacred, that in the name of God individuals must not be violated.

The American Revolution which we celebrate this weekend - reflected that kind of thinking. On the very first page of Arthur Schlesinger's The Cycles of American History, the author acknowledges the dependence of the American ethos, and system, on Calvinism. Jefferson's "Fair Experiment" was to cut religion loose from state sponsorship - to separate church and state - so that religion could exist in freedom and individuals would not be forced to support a particular religion with taxes. The American Revolution was one of the very few revolutions in history that resulted in freer institutions and greater respect for the individual conscience. It is a sad fact of history that most revolutions replace one form of tyranny with another. Ours was different. It resulted in a system of government that intends to respect individual conscience, to protect individual freedom, and which at best is tilted toward toleration and celebration of the widest diversity. That is what we mean by "Under God." You don't have to be a Christian to subscribe to that, but it is surely how Jesus lived and what he meant with his witness. God's sovereignty is not an abstraction, but a formula for protecting, enhancing and always improving the lot of individual human beings here.

"Under God" means that God is sovereign - over all nations and because of that, our own nation. Individuals are accountable to God before they are accountable to their nation. That's radically different from the way nations ordinarily think. So part of the task of religious people, the Church of Jesus Christ particularly, in this nation, is to keep reminding everybody that we are Americans precisely in our freedom to give our total obedience only to God.

"Under God" means that individuals matter: that human rights go to the heart of our experience: that there is nothing more un-American than racism, classism, sexism, or prejudice based on religion. "Under God"

means that discrimination against people, in education, business, civic associations and private clubs is contrary to the entire thrust of our Judeo-Christian heritage and very fundamentally anti-America.

"Under God" means that tyranny will not be tolerated. Jesus was crucified ultimately because political authorities saw in him and what he represented, a threat to their own power. So - we have always had trouble with totalitarianism of the right or the left. Neither Fascism nor Communism has room for a vigorous and free religion. So - "Under God" ought to mean more than a little discomfort when our own nation embraces dictatorship - even in order to oppose another form of tyranny.

"Under God" means people are important here - particularly little people, people in need, unemployed, sick, socially outcast people. Jesus is our mentor. In the name of the sovereign God he befriended, healed, helped and stood with the poor - and invited his friends to do the same. Lewis Thomas warns that if a society may be judged by the way it cares for its undesirables, we have taken a large step backward in recent years. An unholy convergence of liberal sentiment to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill and conservative reluctance to spend public money for mental health has resulted in a pathetic multitude of American people walking the streets of our cities - homeless, jobless, addicted, sick, hungry, without hope, condemned to die of a combination of exposure, malnutrition and disease usually in less than three years. "Under God" means that we must never accommodate, make peace with this national disgrace.

"Under God" means that we care about it when people suffer and die, we risk the vulnerability of caring, of hurting for and with other children of our God. Why care about the poor, the mentally handicapped, the hungry? Why bother about people who are not going to be productive, tax paying, contributing citizens? Why care about one of the most persistent famines in history still raging in Africa? Why care about an epidemic of AIDS which shows no sign of slowing? When Senator Danforth, who is an Episcopal clergyman, was asked that he said: "The answer has to do with who we are and how we perceive ourselves. America is more than a place to hang your hat. It represents a value system most of us believe in very strongly. That value system has to do with the worth of human beings, wherever they are. We believe that lives are worth saving..."

"Under God" means there are no "throw away" people here, no "disposable" human beings. It has always seemed to me that for Christians in America Independence Day is a time for special celebration: not at all to ignore our nation's failures: not at all to gloss over what we did to native Americans, or Africans, or for that matter to any minority: not at all to insist on special privileges as Christians in this land: and not at all to force our views or our faith or our Bible or our symbols on anyone. But simply to remember that the heart of the matter here are values which are connected to a Biblical tradition: to recall that individuals are important here, that the conscience is sacred, that freedom is not political expediency - but a theological truth. And that all of that is not only consistent with, but thoroughly incarnate in the life of the one we know as Lord.

Last Monday I found myself with that rarest of treats - a complete empty day in another city. The city happened to be New York and the day was empty because we had forgotten that, unlike Chicago, the New York galleries are mostly closed on Monday. So - what to do? We looked at churches - ministers always do that, poke around churches wherever we go - who knows what we might learn... We check to see if floors are polished, maybe pick up a sermon copy or at least a bulletin. We looked at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Patrick's; then on downtown to St. Paul's Trinity Parish and then Holy Trinity on Wall Street. Then we took the ferry boat out to the Statue of Liberty, all fresh and clean with a new torch and three-hour lines. We walked around her - looking up at her. We became aware of the others who were looking. What a wonderful mix... Black families, Hispanic families, Hasidic Jews, Germans behind us, a Greek couple, lots of Japanese... I couldn't help think about Emma Lazarus' words -

> "Give me your tired, your poor
> Your huddled masses yearning to be free,
> The wretched refuse from your teeming shores
> Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me:
> I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Well - some of the huddled masses and wretched refuse are here now. Millions came through the golden door on the next island - Ellis Island, and now are part of the main. And many came and are not yet part - some remain homeless, tired and poor... some still yearn to be free. The task is not complete.

But those churches and all those people, that wonderful microcosm of the human family...

"One Nation Under God"...

It is quite an ambition - quite a dream. My suggestion is that God would very much like to see it succeed. Amen.